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Alter-childhoods: Biopolitics and childhoods in alternative education spaces

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Abstract

In this article, I consider “alter-childhoods”: explicit attempts to imagine, construct, talk about, and put into practice childhoods that differ from perceived mainstreams. I critically examine alter-childhoods at 59 alternative education spaces in the UK. I analyze alternative education spaces through the lens of biopolitics, developing nascent work in children’s geographies and childhood studies around hybridity and biopower. I focus on two key themes: materialities and (non)human bodies; intimacy, love and the human scale.

Throughout the analysis, I offer a limited endorsement of the concept of alter-childhoods.

While there exist many attempts to construct childhoods differently, the “alternative” nature of those childhoods is always muddled, complicated, and dynamic. Thus, the concept of alter-childhoods is useful for examining the biopolitics of childhood, and for children’s geographers more generally – but only when considered as a critical tool and questioning device.

Key words: *children’s geographies; hybrid childhoods; geographies of alternative education; the body; emotion and affect*

In this article, I offer the concept of “alter-childhoods” as a tool for examining geographies of childhood and youth. Alter-childhoods are defined as explicit attempts to imagine, construct, talk about, and control the lifeworlds of children *differently* from a perceived mainstream. In several countries, that mainstream is increasingly recognized as a neoliberal one (Mitchell 2003; Katz 2008). Elsewhere, the mainstream may be figured otherwise – perhaps through divergent educational agendas or political systems. Thus, I propose alter-childhoods not as a static category for naming particular discourses, against others (i.e. neoliberalism), but as a cipher for open and, hopefully, productive questioning: how and why do individuals and collectives attempt to imagine, construct and practice childhoods that differ from a perceived mainstream(s)? How do alter-childhoods vary within and between different geographical contexts, and against what imaginaries of a neo-liberal (or other) “mainstream”?

I do not answer all of these questions comprehensively; rather, I open up for scrutiny the concept of alter-childhoods as one of possible utility to children’s geographers, childhood studies scholars, and critical studies of “alternative milieu” (Longhurst 2013, 2100). To do so, I analyze examples taken from the United Kingdom’s large and diverse alternative education sector. UK alternative educators explicitly attempt to conceive education differently from a relatively clearly defined educational mainstream, including a National Curriculum taught in virtually all State-run schools to four-to-eighteen-year-olds. Alternative education spaces afford a relatively clear-cut series of case studies for investigating alter-childhoods.

Nevertheless, there also exists a series of complications, which allows critical interrogation of the alterity of both the education and the childhoods imagined there. Thus, this article is based on three premises: that there exist diverse examples of alter-childhoods; that alter-childhoods require empirical investigation; but that immediately one investigates alter-childhoods, a host of complexities emerges, which require further consideration.

The “alter” part of “alter-childhoods” is knowingly deployed after a host of contemporary scholars who critique oppositional (*anti*-modern) forms of praxis that simply seek to reverse (and thereby reproduce) apparently pervasive neoliberal/global mainstreams. Such theorists prefer forms of experimentation and social organization that recalibrate, twist, dislocate, or operate in dissonance with a perceived mainstream: diverse “alter”-narratives and/or post-meta-narratives (Hardt and Negri [2009, 101] on “alter-modernity”; also Gibson-Graham 2006; Unger 2007; Braidotti 2011). There are no pretenses that such alter/post-modern experiments ultimately be different-enough to succeed. Rather, resonating with the brief depiction of UK alternative education spaces above, they proffer alterity whilst immediately opening-up for critical debate the nature of that alterity. I ask whether childhoods could be considered similarly – namely, as “alter-childhoods”?

I thus use term alter-childhoods as a questioning device to develop three fields of scholarship. The analysis contributes to a gathering but diverse body of work that interrogates contemporary modes of biopolitical governance and urges consideration of alternative ways of conceiving and doing life-itself. I argue that such frames are important for interrogating alter-childhoods. I also add to the so-called “new wave” of childhood studies that has begun to broach questions of biopolitics and hybridity in childhood experiences (Ryan 2011, 439). In addition, I consider childhood – and education – as important spheres of life in which alternative milieu are constituted, yet which have geographers have rarely examined.

The first part of the article positions the contribution of this article within a review of the first two of these three fields¹. The second defines alternative education, focusing on the UK, before summarizing the research methodology underpinning this article. The remaining sections consider three key themes that emerged from my analysis of 59 UK-based alternative education spaces, leading into a detailed, critical consideration of the potential theoretical purchase of alter-childhoods.

Biopolitics, childhoods and children's geographies

Critical scholarship on biopolitics has converged around a sense that life-itself may be governed. From the eighteenth century onwards, States and other institutions turned increasingly to ways of knowing, disciplining and manipulating populations. Such techniques intervened in processes that “extend throughout the *social body* rather than *capital and labor* exclusively” (Lazzarato 2006, 12). Biopolitics therefore elides knowledge about life processes (from biological-behavioral sciences) with governmental techniques to produce subjectivities (Hardt and Negri 2009). Such techniques render realms of life governable that had hitherto exceeded control – from contagious disease to neurological processes (Rose 2007). Earlier (pre-1960) biopolitics operated at the scale of individual bodies; more recently, a “molecular gaze” has emerged, trained upon microscopic processes, such as neurology (Rose 2007, 11). Thus, the purview of politics has shifted from a view of the population as a body (the body-politic) to a political concern with the fleshy matter *of* bodies (Grosz 1995). Indeed, feminist scholarship has been instrumental in specifying how bodies – human and nonhuman – may not only be politicized but also capitalized, sexualized, and aestheticized (Grosz 2005, 2012).

Therefore, the various techniques of biopolitics have reinforced and intensified social divisions. Herein, different kinds of lives have been rendered visible (Agamben 1998): *zoe*, or biological life (see below); political life, in which the majority population are involved in democratic systems, and which in part distinguishes humans from animals; bare life, or a specific category of life distinct from *zoe*, wherein individual humans are excluded from political life, and rendered expendable – perhaps through their imprisonment in exceptional spaces not subject to “normal” legal protocol. Whilst this article is not specifically framed by Agamben’s work, his argument raises two important questions: first, around the extent to

which particular social categories (gender, ethnicity, and, particularly, age) are positioned in respect of the different kinds of life articulated by biopolitics; second, and consequently, of how resistance to hegemonic forms of biopower can occur. A central problem in Agamben's (1998) work is whether and how bare life may itself be marshaled into resistance. While feminist- and Marxist-inspired scholarship has demonstrated how children – as “waste” – are rendered something akin to bare life (Katz 2011), my focus is upon attempts to resist hegemonic biopower and constitute alternatives that involve individuals variously positioned within biopolitical and social orderings, not only at their extremities.

Human geographers have paid increasing attention to the spaces of biopolitics, with examples ranging from surveillance (Amoore 2006) to emergency planning (Adey and Anderson 2011). Significantly, they have called for consideration of “biopolitics from below” (Anderson 2012, 35): biopolitical alternatives to an apparently pervasive neoliberal/globalized mainstream. Via the tropes of feminist and/or nonrepresentational theory, such alternatives have in part been theorized via new or vital-materialist understandings of the world (Coole and Frost 2010). Such understandings posit the human as always-already constituted through and with the non-human (Latour 2005). This move questions the primacy of human subjects in governing the world. Nonetheless, and of more direct relevance to this article, Bennett (2010) and Braidotti (2011) ask how configurations of the non/human might be alternatively arranged, for instance towards environmental justice. Indeed, (post-)feminist theorists have been at the forefront of hybrid, more-than-human forms of conceptual experimentation and praxis that “elaborat[e] on imperceptible cosmic, biological, and geologic forces of the universe”, through artistic and other means (Yusoff 2012, 971).

Simultaneously, many scholars argue that *local*, on-the-ground practices of alterity require further empirical investigation (Longhurst 2013). They argue for *trans-local*, comparative analyses of diverse spaces and practices – a kind of “reading for difference” (Gibson-Graham

2006, xxxi), where micropolitical experiments might be framed as broader, perhaps more potent, and durable networks for more-than-social change (e.g. Unger 2009; Hardt and Negri 2009; Braidotti 2011). In this vein, geographers have offered important empirical analyses of a range of diverse alternatives, particularly inspired by Gibson-Graham's (2006) diverse economies framework (Longhurst 2013).

Notwithstanding these advances, children's geographers and scholars of childhood have rarely undertaken research that deploys these conceptual frames, and it is my aim in this article to develop a more explicit agenda for doing so. Nevertheless, amongst these now large and diverse sub-fields – which there is not space to comprehensively review here² – two broad areas of investigation offer key antecedents, which I also seek to develop.

Firstly, childhood scholars have begun to interrogate the biopolitical and hybrid constitution (frequently termed “construction”) of childhood (Prout 2005; Ruckenstein 2013). Several studies acknowledge the recursive relationship between biopolitical modes of governance and modern constructions of childhood – from the birth of modern psychology to education as social investment (Simons 2006; Wells 2011; Lee and Motzkau 2011; Ryan 2012). Moreover, scholars of “hybrid childhoods” recognize that

“many present and emergent bio-political formations of childhood consist of novel and unpredictable connections among materials and processes, forces and events that are not best understood through bio-social dualism” (Lee and Motzkau 2011, 8)

Significantly, Lee and Motzkau (2011, 7) posit “navigational aids” for orienting key research questions amongst a bewildering array of emergent, heterogeneous becoming-childhoods or becoming-adulthoods (e.g. Prout 2005; Horton and Kraftl 2006; Aitken 2010; Curti and Moreno 2010; Rautio 2013). Here, bodies are situated not (only) within for-the-moment

performances, but as “constitutive components of the biopolitical fabric of being”, offering social-material sites of resistance (Hardt and Negri 2009, 31; also Gibson-Graham 2006).

Lee and Motzkau (2011) call for attention to the coherence of particular biopolitical childhoods around issues that matter, somehow, within a particular context. Read this way, children’s geographers *have* begun to offer navigational aids for understanding biopolitics of childhood. Much of this work – again, owing a significant debt to feminist theory – has involved critical interrogations of the exercise of biopolitical power by authorities *over* young people. As Wells (2011) notes, the predominant thematics of this work are two-fold: health and education. On the former, Wells (2011, 19) notes the emergence of the “psy-disciplines”, which, once rendered accessible to governmental institutions, fostered an incipient “psychiatrization of childhood” (Philo 2011, 33-34). Elsewhere, Evans’s (2010, 21 & 34) exemplary analysis of contemporary UK anti-obesity policies finds them “pre-emptive biopolitics” aimed at categorizable subjects to secure against a future obesity “time bomb”. On the latter axis, scholars have examined the confluence of biopolitics with education, especially in schools (Philo 2001; Pike 2008). Historical geographers have demonstrated how the training of children’s bodily capacities supported nation-building projects in the UK and USA (Ploszajska 1996; Gagen 2004). Others have shown how contemporary (neuro)scientific understandings of children’s behavior and emotions are becoming central to teaching and disciplinary practices in schools (Pykett 2012; Gagen 2013).

Despite these advances, most studies offer critical perspectives on the governance of children’s lives *from above* – analyses of archival materials, policy documents, scientific expertise, and curricula produced by those in Government. Indeed, these analyses resonate with similarly important theorizations of neoliberal childhoods (e.g., Ruddick 2007; Katz 2008) and contestations over the contribution of young people to social life (e.g. Wyness 2013). Thus, a *second* strand of scholarship within children’s geographies is instructive.

While rarely, if ever, drawing on the languages of biopolitics, recent advances in the subdiscipline have expanded what counts as “political” in children’s everyday lives, beyond “voice” and “participation” (Kraftl 2013a). Significantly, there has been increased interest in these children’s geographies (Skelton 2013), children’s political agency, activism and protest (Jeffrey 2012) and everyday political acts (Bosco 2010; Kallio and Häkli 2013). Whilst not completely addressing Vanderbeck’s (2008) concerns that children’s geographers have said little about controversial issues (like the age of sexual consent), such scholarship has acknowledged the complex politicization of children’s everyday lives. It has also led to pressing questions about the limits of nonrepresentational children’s geographies (Mitchell and Elwood 2012), where, arguably, nonrepresentational children’s geographers depoliticize childhood in favor of immediate, ephemeral experiences (Mitchell and Elwood 2012, 793; but see Kraftl 2013a, for a critique).

Despite divergent conceptual and political standpoints, children’s geographers have developed impressive insights into children’s diverse experiences of the political (although not necessarily the *bio*-political as defined above). Perhaps most notably, some recent research cuts across representational and nonrepresentational frames: it *connects* momentary, embodied micro-geographical encounters with more enduring concerns. Whether concerned with the mobile masculinities entailed in fathering (Aitken 2010) or the ways in which institutionalized idea(l)s about childhood are “subverted and transformed by and through children’s life-affirming practices” (Curti and Moreno 2010, 424), questions of intergenerational relations, lifecourse, and the politics of play, work, and family care are recursively produced through everyday experience (also Bosco 2010).

In posing questions about alter-childhoods, I develop the above literatures in several ways. I exemplify and offer a conceptual language for a social group (children) only cursorily acknowledged in theorizing on biopolitical alternatives, which is more commonly concerned

with gendered, raced or sexualized differences (e.g., Hardt and Negri 2009; Braidotti 2011; Ruglis 2011). I also focus on childhood – and education – as an important and largely overlooked arena for geographical inquiry into alternative spatialities. Third, I develop exciting lines of enquiry into the(bio)politics of childhood and hybrid childhoods with a focus on a new navigational aid: alter-childhoods. Fourth, I extend that latter work with a focus – and the irony is not lost here – on how *adults* (although adults positioning themselves explicitly outside mainstream regimes of governance) attempt to construct alternative childhood spaces. Whilst adults are not absent from work on children’s everyday political geographies (and children are by no means absent from this article), I am concerned with deliberative, programmatic, often long-term projects – curricula, schools, and the like – wherein the presence of adults is arguably inescapable. I acknowledge that readers maybe frustrated by the lack of children’s voices: yet it is important to recognize that the adults in question here are rarely those with the same kinds of political power as those involved in producing hegemonic, neoliberal discourses on education. With these caveats in mind, I therefore offer the following analyses as one way in to questions of alter-childhoods.

Geographies of alternative education

Woods and Woods (2009, 3) define alternative education as

“[f]orms of education grounded in alternative philosophies and cultures
[...distinct from] mainstream education [...] as the main conventions of publicly
funded school education as generally understood in Western countries”.

They identify global examples of alternative education, including the UK (also Kraftl 2013b), Brazil, and Palestine. Meanwhile, other scholars have researched education in Australia (Ferguson and Seddon 2007) and Canada (Quirke 2009). In each context, the positioning of

“alternatives” relative to the “mainstream” varies. Some countries (like the UK) have national curricula; others (like the US) operate public school systems where curricula are set through local school boards; elsewhere, there may be no discernible mainstream at all, problematizing the status of “alternatives”.

In the United Kingdom, however – the context for this article – the definition is more specific. It incorporates spaces that: are not directly funded by the UK Government; do not follow a National Curriculum; follow some kind of explicitly alternative curriculum; may or may not be called “schools”, but which are intended to look very different from mainstream schools, and in which relationships between children and adults are reconfigured (Sliwka 2008; see later analysis); offer a replacement for all or part of a child’s (4-16) education in a context where it is assumed that children are educated at school. Significantly, while forms of privatization and responsabilization are a prominent feature of neoliberal educational regimes (Mitchell 2003), a decades-old clause in UK Educational Law (pre-dating neoliberalism) states that *parents* are responsible for ensuring appropriate education for their children. Thus, for instance, parents must inform their child’s school or local authority if their wish to withdraw them from that school, but they do not have to inform any authority if they do not wish to send them to a State school in the first place. This legal position has meant that alternative education spaces have existed for decades in the UK. Accordingly, the alternatives presented in this article should be interpreted not only as alternatives to neoliberalism, but also as longer-standing alternatives to *education*, to school, and to cultures of child-rearing as commonly understood in the UK. Parents do not choose alternative education only as a way to circumnavigate neoliberal forms of governance, even if the effects thereof are becoming increasingly important factors in those choices.

In light of this observation, it is important to note that the majority of educators situate their work directly within some critique about both mainstream education and mainstream child-

care cultures even though they may see themselves as simply invested in a particular pedagogic approach (Woods and Woods 2009). Again, these critiques have circulated for decades, within the UK and elsewhere: for instance, in Dewey's (1997, 17-18) dualistic formulation of "traditional" versus "progressive" education, wherein the former apparently privileges rote learning, didactic instructional techniques. Perhaps the most stinging critiques – although not without their own detractors (e.g., Barrow 2012) – come from commentators who would do away with the institution of school for its apparently deleterious effects upon children's learning, health, and well-being (e.g., Illich 2002; Gatto 2009).

The above points are picked up later, but for context, it is worth noting that contemporary critics have identified a number of specific (largely neoliberal) trends in UK mainstream education, which emerged in various ways in my research. First, emphasis upon standardized testing, league tables and school inspections that critics argue put undue pressure on children. Second, a move to view education (and childhood interventions) as "investment in human capital", set within the familiar neoliberal tropes of (inter)national competitive advantage, flexible skilling, individualization, and responsibilization of both children and parents (Mizen 2003, 455; Katz 2008; Jupp 2013). Third, related tussles over the UK's National Curricula³, which at the time of writing centered around the reintroduction of written examinations, the skills and subject areas that should be core to a child's education, and the relative autonomy accorded to a school or individual teacher. Fourth, and perhaps most relevant to questions of biopolitics, there have been concerns about how the State is apparently encroaching on areas not usually deemed the remit of education: the deployment of neuroscientific advances such as "brain training" (Pykett 2012), stronger controls over what children eat (Pike 2008), and strict regulation of children's bodily functions, such as rules about toilet use (Conroy 2010). Whether these concerns are all founded, and in all schools, is an important question, but exceeds the remit of this article. Rather, I examine how alternative educators incorporate these

critiques into the social and material constitution of their education spaces in the construction of alter-childhoods.

Doing geographies of (alternative) education

With its focus on education spaces, this study is situated within an amorphous range of recent geographical research on education, which some scholars have – warily – termed “geographies of education” (Holloway and Jöns 2012). Specifically, this article resonates with a subset of that research that focuses on the “subjects of education” – pupils, parents, teachers, etcetera, in turn located within the premises of subdisciplinary children’s geographies (Holloway et al. 2010, 594). Given my focus on alter-*childhoods*, I do not contribute directly to these recent intra-disciplinary debates. However, developing Holloway et al.’s (2010) argument, I note that there is virtually no research by geographers on alternative education spaces, and especially the subjects engaged therein (exceptions being Cameron 2006; Kraftl 2006; Ridgers et al. 2012; Kraftl 2013b).

The underpinning research for this article encompasses over a decade’s worth of data collection (published as Kraftl 2013b). I examined in a wide-ranging way how space mattered to the constitution of diverse forms of alternative education. I undertook qualitative research at 59 alternative education spaces across the UK, visiting each site at least once, for a period of at least one-to-three days. At each site, I observed and participated in a range of learning activities, keeping a field diary. I engaged teachers, practitioners, pupils and parents in informal conversations, also recorded in my field diary. Finally, I undertook 114 semi-structured interviews with adults and children (of between 20 minutes and five hours), which were tape-recorded and transcribed where appropriate⁴.

Akin to work on children's everyday political geographies, I attended to both representational and nonrepresentational domains of education. This included examination of broadly conceived nonrepresentational concerns – such as how bodily practices, affects, emotions, material objects, and architectures were arranged to promote certain kinds of learning and perform qualitative differences from mainstream schools. This was not simply a theoretical manoeuvre but a function of pedagogies promoted by alternative educators – which, for instance, valorize artistic, performative, kinaesthetic modes of learning (Sliwka 2008). Simultaneously, my research involved representation: using interviews to examine the histories of alternative educators and education spaces, their broader goals and politics, the connections between alternative and mainstream educational spaces, and, as will become clear, to articulate how bodily practices, emotions and materialities *matter*.

The 59 case study sites included Steiner, Montessori, Forest, Democratic and Human-Scale Schools, Homeschooling, and Care Farms. These spaces were not fully representative of the UK's alternative education sector, but provided a sample that covered diverse approaches to learning, taken from across the UK. They are also the kinds of approaches that feature in common definitions of alternative education (Carnie 2003; Woods and Woods 2009). Moreover, versions of all of these educational approaches – although not always positioned in the alternative sector – appear outside the UK. For instance: Care Farms are based on the Dutch principles of green care (Haubenhof et al. 2010) and therapeutic camps appear in the USA (Morse-Dunkley 2009); Forest Schools originated in Scandinavia and are popular in Germany (Knight 2009); Steiner and Montessori Schools and Homeschooling exist around the world. There is not space here to properly introduce each of these learning spaces (see Kraftl 2013b). To combat this, I provide some relatively lengthy interview quotations where interviewees explain their approaches, supplementing empirical material with reference to relevant published material.

Doing alternative education: doing alter-childhoods?

The remainder of the article examines three of the key themes that emerged through my research. These themes correspond with the premises with which I began the article: they indicate some of the principal ways in which UK alternative education spaces are constituted *as* alternatives; but they also illustrate some of the complexities around the terms ‘alternative education’ and alter-childhoods. In addition, I focus upon the first two themes at greater length because they resonate with theorizing on alternative biopolitical experiments. The first – on hybrid bodies/materialities – was spawned by direct questioning about how physical spaces (such as school buildings) were used to facilitate alternative education. The second theme – on the human-scale, intimacy and love – emerged through discussion about how alternative educators managed relationships between adults and children in ways often deliberately differentiated from mainstream schools. The third theme – “what’s the difference?” – includes more wide-ranging observations to provide a sense of the complexities that emerge through the institutionalization, financing, aspirations and political dis/engagements of alternative education spaces.

De/schooling hybrid bodies and materialities

The name of the first theme is inspired by two very different sources. Firstly, Ivan Illich’s (2002) treatise on the ineffectiveness of modern, institutionalized schooling. Illich’s solution – deschooling – was the dislocation of education from institutions to self-organizing, technologically enhanced, fluid learning formations. Yet I retain the “/” in “de/schooling” – to posit dissonance with, not (always) outright opposition to, UK mainstream schooling: a creative re-appropriation of school-ing. Secondly, the slowly developing new wave of

childhood studies, which has outlined multitudinous entanglements of human/nonhuman in childhood experiences (Prout 2005; Rautio 2013). However, such scholarship has not yet traced explicitly *alternative* hybrid childhoods: a task that is equally important to the mapping of alternative, post-human configurations as those around gender, sexuality or race (Braidotti 2011).

Before discussing their own education spaces, many educators offered strongly-held views about how the hybrid spaces of *mainstream* schools affected children's bodies. From my sample of over thirty homeschooling families, for instance, a subset (a third) had removed their children from mainstream school *because* of its effects on their children's health:

“[w]e took [autistic son] out of school when he was five. That was mainly because he was becoming so physically ill. He was having nosebleeds, asthma attacks, panic attacks – and, he had depression. We tried lots of things to keep him in mainstream [education]. But [son] has sensitivity to touch and smell. So for one hour he was taken out of the classroom to work with a support worker. And for the entire time she sat putting her acrylic nails on. [...] And when he came home [son] said it was awful. He couldn't stand the smell. That was the final straw” (Jenny, homeschooling mother²).

This (albeit extreme) example articulates two broader, longer-standing biopolitical currents around the management of children in UK schools and, quite possibly, beyond. The first is the treatment of children with emotional, behavioral or social differences, characterized by processes of categorization and intervention along measurable psychological/emotional competencies. Often, as for Jenny's son, this leads to physical separation from other children to facilitate “appropriate” emotional-behavioral capacities (Bowlby et al. 2014). The second relates to what Conroy (2010) terms the encroachment of the State – via schools – into matters once deemed the preserve of the family and/or other professionals – including

abortion advice for fourteen-year-old girls, and regulations about toilet use. These perceived encroachments are common reasons for the withdrawal of children from school by both UK and US homeschoolers (Lois 2013). Such observations also tally with broader, Foucauldian- and feminist-inspired arguments that, from the nineteenth century onwards, governance has operated through the bodies of a population (Grosz 1995; Bissell 2011).

In less extreme examples, participants repeatedly spoke about the bodily effects of what one headteacher at a Human-Scale School called the “artifice of school”, and a Forest-School practitioner termed “the conforming, constricting, uniform structure of schools. Uniform clothes, books, pens, desks, facing the front, all the rest”. In this context, two young compared their experiences of mainstream and alternative spaces:

“I couldn’t stand it any more. I’ll say it now, yeah? I couldn’t be doing with the rules and all that crap [...]. And, like, I was – I was bullied, yeah? And pressure, pressure, all the time, it was, just the pressure. But coming here, like, when I was off school [temporarily excluded by school], it was a release. There’s space, yeah? For your head, like, and just to literally get away from other people for a bit” (Monica, aged 16, Care Farm attendee)

“[Upon going to a fee-paying school] I was told to calm down, because I hug too many people. I was like, yeah. That’s not calming down. I’m the calmest person there. They’re all the ones who are uptight. It’s kind of weird [...] the difference between the seriousness. It’s seriousness of two kinds. Like [I am] serious when I’m into something. But they’re even serious about having fun. Like so competitive” (James, aged 15, homeschooled until attending a fee-paying school aged 14)

These quotations recount experiences of young people who have experienced the “artifice” of school – whether State-funded or fee-paying – and multiple pressures writ by neoliberal childhoods. Monica and James indicated the enduring emotional and bodily affects/effects that characterized their experiences. James’ account – of “seriousness of two kinds” – is particularly striking because it witnesses how similarly-named bodily capacities or affects (“seriousness”) are composed, via interpersonal encounters, in different ways, towards different ends, within different (mainstream and alternative) biopolitical regimes (see also Hardt and Negri 2009, 43).

However significant these experiences, I shift my analysis hereto how, on the basis of such comparisons, educators described how they had sought to engender *alternative* configurations of human and nonhuman affects, bodies and performances. Anne was the director of a network of Small Schools for severely bullied children. She sought to educate children in what she termed “an alternative space” from mainstream schools, because those bullied children had “a fear of an institution that smells, looks, feels, sounds like a school. It had to be the antithesis of that, devoid of those markers”. She tried to create home-like, intimate, cosy spaces that resonated with the values of Human-Scale Education (see next section). Yet she did not simply privilege the scale or feel of the physical spaces of the school: the materialities of built form supported her work with children at an apparently basic level: “for instance, I taught kids how to *walk*, how to look at you, using drama. [...] I even taught them how to open the door and walk in” (Anne, director of a Human-Scale School)

Significantly, de/schooling is achieved through deliberative combinations of built forms and objects (both present and absent) and a range of interpersonal and embodied practices. Here, we see the role of *space* in demonstrating alterity, especially *to* children; from smells, to the size of a physical space, to the atmosphere of that space (Kraftl and Adey 2008), to the management of emotions and bodily practices by teachers. This was a chance to re-set: for

young people to experience their childhoods in a space quite different from, if not the “antithesis” of school.

But just as crucial here are longer-term, equally important questions stimulated by the very presence of Anne’s small-school network. Are spaces such as Anne’s schools *necessary* in societies with schooling systems where serious cases of bullying take place? Is it the role of the State or the alternative sector to address such problems? Additionally, the aim of this network is – as with many Care Farms and Forest Schools – not simply remedial, but ultimately to return the majority of the children to a mainstream school. These are, then, *temporarily* constituted alter-childhoods, produced through carefully manufactured, material-performative spaces that embody and signify difference from school in order to re-instill a sense of “normalcy” into a child’s life (going back to school). Thus, already, a sense of the complexity and dynamism of alter-childhoods becomes apparent.

The imperative to return children to school is important. Nevertheless, the pedagogic, political, and ethical aspirations of alternative education spaces frequently lie in other domains, too, and therefore produce other, hybrid, alter-childhoods. Forest Schools – which offer activities such as fire-lighting and den-building, usually in small areas of woodland – remove children from familiar surroundings, allow controlled risks, and prompt learning through play, conversation and happenstance (Knight 2009; Ridgers et al. 2012). Crucial is a conception of “nature”, which, it is implied, is something increasingly *unfamiliar* to children in contexts like the UK (Louv 2005). At one Forest School, Joanne worked with teenagers (mainly boys) from a deprived rural housing estate. She talked about the benefits of a woodland experience for teenage boys, in ways that will hardly be surprising to many readers. First, in terms of their learning about nature and gaining confidence being in woodland; second, as a kind of safety valve – again, a temporarily alternative childhood experience that may or may not have more enduring effects. As Joanne put it: “compared

with living on an [housing] estate. Maybe that's the bottom line. Freedom. From school. From home. From whatever"

Despite the apparent romanticization of nature and childhood at play here (compare Jones 2007), it appeared that Joanne's conceptualization of nature was also weakly *dissonant* with more problematically deterministic, Louv-ian understandings.

"One thing I will never forget, with a group in the woods, was a group with lots of behavioral and emotional problems. We had to be careful about introducing sharp instruments. [...]. So when we finally got to using very sharp penknives and bow saws, we remarked that all we could hear was birds. Silent. They were all just completely absorbed and engaged, with their little penknives. You know, the way they're meant to hold their body, where they hold the knives, wearing their gloves. And everything turned, then. Those sessions sort of became *theirs*. And from then on, *they* defined all the sessions."

This was an intentional, dynamic performance of nature – a “place-responsive pedagogy, [involving] explicit efforts to teach by means of an environment with the aim of understanding and improving human-environment relations” (Mannion et al. 2013, 792; also Taylor 2013). Contra Louv, this was not simply a “natural” space but a more-than-social one (Kraftl 2013a), constituted through human agents (Joanne and the boys), non-human “natures” (birds singing, trees) and non-human objects (tools, like knives and saws), created by humans but enacting a powerful hold over the boys. Thus, despite her obvious position of authority, this moment was a turning point, a mixture of intention and contingency, through which the relative agency of a range of actors was reconfigured. For Joanne, this moment fostered all kinds of alter-relations – as the boys became empowered, within the confines of the Forest School; and as they learned new skills that they would perhaps not have at school. This recognition is, then, another important step towards dismantling the rather simplistic,

deterministic, romanticized conceptions of nature presented by Louv (2005) and others. It is important in the spirit of post-feminist conceptions of biopolitics (Braidotti 2011): offering not direct opposition (which is also important), but *dissonance* with those Louv-ian conceptions.

In the spirit of offering the concept of alter-childhoods as an open question, however, I do not promote any sense that this is somehow a “successful” example of biopower from below. For, to continue that questioning: with what certainty can it be said that this moment exceeded what Dewsbury (2012, 81) terms the “habit-ecology of capitalist sentiment and meditation”, even momentarily? How would we (academics, practitioners, young people) know? Would it help to know that Joanne has a past history of radical, direct environmental action, and would that mean that this moment can legitimately be named “alternative”? Yet, if as academics we are to take seriously the more enduring (bio)political effects of embodied, materialized performances, as well as of voice and representation (Mitchell and Elwood 2012), these questions need to be addressed

As one way to broach these questions, I examine next the work of Care Farmers, who sought to challenge rather more rose-tinted views of nature/childhood. Working along a model of “social” or “green” care, and often run by volunteers or social enterprise groups, Care Farms offer an alternative caring space to institutionalized, State-run care facilities (Haubenhofers et al. 2010). Many Care Farmers provide therapeutic experiences for young people with emotional, behavioral, physiological and/or psychological differences, who are frequently at risk of exclusion from a mainstream school. A basic premise is that through engagement in tasks such as animal grooming, mucking-out, or potting-on plants, young people gradually acquire skills required to forge meaningful relationships with people (Haubenhofers et al. 2010). Indeed, at each of the ten Care Farms I visited, I was told that the term “Care” was a

misnomer – because Care Farms were equally spaces for *learning* – developing skills that could not be fostered in mainstream schools (Kraftl 2013b).

Care Farmers sought to challenge predominant views about children's (non-)engagement with nature. Indeed, I was occasionally struck that they were trying to shock or provoke *me*; as Yvonne explained, matter-of-factly:

“[a]ll the teachers say it. [Coming here] brings them out of themselves. Schools have so many constraints. It's messy. It's muddy. It's gritty. At the same time the direction's quite strong, we don't dress it up as something it's not. It's a real working environment. When it rains the work has to be done. When the manure is flowing through the yard they have to get on with it. It's structures of life and how we deal with it [...] because if you don't then life doesn't *just* go on, there are implications. We can't have a lamb dying just because some kid is acting up. Simple. (Yvonne, care farm practitioner)

At another Care Farm, Clive told me, with a slight smirk, how they want young people to “internalize the process” of growing and eating food, following its full cycle from seed to food, as it travels through the human body, to the disposal and recycling of waste products. For him, eating was “really important to changing their behavior”, a key part of learning.

“It's not so much the fact it's ‘natural’ – it's just trying something different, having worked on it themselves. [They are] all supermarket kids. A lot of them don't know where food comes from [...]. And the thing they like is taking it home with them [...] and showing mum at home”.

Again dissonant with the idyllic natures present in Louv's (2005) treatise on woodland environments, the process of engaging with “nature” is meant to be challenging, even

shocking. For Care Farmers, this is a central point of difference from both mainstream schools and predominant child-care cultures that produce “supermarket kids”.

In these hybrid entanglements of childhoods/natures, there is a sense that, as Bennett (2011, 141) writes, “shit happens” – the world goes on, literally, in excess of human agency, as manure flows through a farmyard on a rainy day; or food grows, enters and leaves the human body (see Mol 2008). Indeed, before I visited their homes, many Homeschoolers explained to me with a mixture of pride and apology that their houses were a complete mess – with toys, books, glue, paint, art, glitter, computers, *whatever*, all over the place. In other words, some – but by no means all – alternative educators took delight in rather chaotic appearance of their education spaces. And this is because material mess affords many opportunities: chance comings-together of objects with children (Rautio 2013), important to non-didactic and kinaesthetic learning styles; exposure to unruly nonhuman processes, helping to challenge commonly-held conceptions (about food, for instance); or, as a way to symbolise (in some cases, to me) that *something different* happens in this space.

Nevertheless, Care Farmers and other educators did not evacuate their narratives of questions around human agency. They retained a sense that humans must carefully reflect upon those moments when it is necessary to attempt to wrest some vestige of control over a space, to *deal* with “structures of life”, as Yvonne put it. These are educational spaces, in which deliberative reflection and planning is crucial, conjoining representation and nonrepresentation, non-human and human agency. Such a calculated decision to exert human agency (Bennett 2010), here (not there) and now (not later) could, then, be framed as an ongoing wager: a “trust in the unconscious processes necessary to transform a body of knowledge into the memorial body” (Francoz 1999, 19-20). On this count, it would be quite wrong to afford a sense that all alternative education spaces are chaotic. In Steiner Schools, the careful choreographing of architecture, interior decor and color, furniture, toys, smells

and bodily gestures is meant to create an atmosphere that supports a child at a defined developmental stage (Kraftl 2006). In Montessori Schools, the careful ordering of toys and material learning objects, which are usually placed in exactly the same places in the classroom at the beginning of each day, is imperative in order for children to feel confident in their environment (Carnie 2003). Thus, the level of control over alternative hybrid childhoods varies at each educational space, for diverse reasons.

The above examples offer insights into some key ways in which materials and bodies are reconfigured in the process of de/schooling – in attempts to construct education and childhood differently from a perceived mainstream. The focus upon bodies and materials is important in a pedagogical sense: these are key realms in which alternative educators work. But it is also significant because several biopolitical theorists agree that the most pervasive, neoliberal modes of governance operate via an “intense focus on bodies” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 37) and materialities (Coole and Frost 2010), which, if reconfigured, might constitute equally powerful alternative possibilities for the conduct of life-itself. I have demonstrated that such possibilities are not solely geared to a critique *of* mainstream schools and childhoods. However, in twenty-first century Britain, alternative education spaces are increasingly being posited as a remedy for the problematic somatic effects of neoliberal biopower upon young bodies, particularly in mainstream schools. Nonetheless, in the spirit of deploying the term “alter-childhoods” as a questioning device, I have already raised a range of moral and political problematics: perhaps most fundamentally, how one would *know* whether alternative hybrid childhoods *really* exceed a perceived mainstream; but also whether the challenges they pose (for instance about “supermarket kids”) are morally, practically and politically justifiable in a given context.

Childhood at a human scale? Intimacy, love, and child-adult relations

A second, defining feature of many alternative education spaces is their conceptualization of child-adult relations (Cooper 2007). Even where adults are identified as “teachers” and children as “pupils”, this relationship is usually conceived differently from mainstream schools. In this section, I consider how alternative educators seek to practice child-adult relationships – and therefore childhoods – at a more “human” scale. The term is taken from Human Scale Education, an internationally-recognized concept that promotes smallness of scale –privileging human relationships through smaller class sizes, and more frequent, intimate and “meaningful” interactions between children and adults (Harland and Mason 2010). My analysis does not only focus on pupil:teacher ratios, but a broader range of moral, emotional and political registers through which “human” scale relationships might be fostered – and especially notions of intimacy and love, which recurred frequently in my research.

I do not posit the human scale as a solution to perceived problems of mainstream education, nor that alternative education spaces are *de facto* any more humane. Rather, this focus is directly stimulated by critiques that have problematized child-adult relations in mainstream schools. Many alternative educators and parents recounted their dismay that teachers no longer feel able to touch children – to cuddle or comfort them, to apply sunscreen– because of a range of safeguarding regulations that, if interpreted literally, might lead to disciplinary action. Yet this apparent move to reduce intimate relationships between children and adults sits uncomfortably with concomitant impulses – outlined earlier–to govern children’s bodies. This contradictory or “schizophrenic” approach to children’s bodies relations is for some commentators emblematic of neoliberal biopolitical childhoods (Conroy 2010, 325).

Many children are sent to alternative education spaces because of how they attempt to envisage and manage child-adult relationships in different ways from the “schizophrenic” approaches of the mainstream. For instance, several existing studies have identified the need

for continued intimacy with their children as a key justification for parents to homeschool (Lois 2013; Merry and Howell 2009). In my research, mothers – the overwhelming majority of UK home educators – articulated homeschooling as an extension of what they believed to be natural child-rearing techniques, such as attachment, long-term breastfeeding and baby-led weaning. Simultaneously, however, a shared discourse amongst many homeschooling mothers was that it should be parents’ responsibility – not the State’s, via schools – to make decisions about what children eat or how they dress. Indeed, one mother told me that the moment that prompted her to withdraw her child from school was when the children in her daughter’s class were asked to keep a secret from their parents in preparation for a school play. Notably, many mothers did not identify the intentions behind such requests as insidious in themselves, but were concerned by a broader principle in which schools intervened into children’s intimate lives.

The question of intimacy is also an important one outside the familial contexts of homeschooling. If mainstream schools are unable to deal satisfactorily with intimacy between children and adults, then a further question for alternative educators who are not homeschoolers becomes: what are the “right” kinds of intimacy between children and adults *outside* a home environment? The rest of this section focuses upon a series of examples where educators sought to broach this question, progressing through conceptions of intimacy and, briefly, love (for an alternative and extended analysis of love, see Kraftl 2013b).

A recurring technique for fostering more human-scale learning experiences was through one-to-one, child-adult interaction. This practice is especially important for Forest Schools and Care Farms that work with disaffected teenagers (usually boys) at risk of exclusion from school. Many educators argued that such children had lost the ability to interact meaningfully with others, especially adults in authority. Thus, they were not only removed from the stresses of the classroom (as identified earlier), but placed to work one-to-one with an adult

who was not a “teacher”. The idea behind this process – which is not always successful – is that this is the first step in re-calibrating a young person’s attitude to others. At one Forest School in Scotland, I spent a day with Jack, a fourteen-year-old boy who had recently been excluded from school, and Ben, a Forest School practitioner. Ben had been working with Jack for one day a week for several months, and their relationship had undergone several highs and lows:

“We offer loads of activities here that most of the kids just can’t [...] do.

Building, conservation stuff, working with wildlife [...] the usual stuff. But with Jack, we just couldn’t settle on something where we were on the same level.

Several times he just did nae turn up, so there was me thinking, that’s it then.

And some days he said not a word to me. With some kids they just don’t get on here, so they move on someplace else. I tried everything. But what saved it for me and Jack [...] was the biking”

Like many informal educators, Jack sought to start from “where the kids are at”: from their interests and concerns, and to build up a relationship from there (Cartwright 2012). In Jack’s case, this process had been particularly fraught: working through several activities and, Ben told me, “trying out different ways of acting” around Jack – sometimes saying nothing, sometimes constantly talking about what they were doing, until Jack responded. When I visited, Ben and Jack spent an hour squatting on the ground, side-by-side, repairing one of the mountain bikes, talking in hushed, calm voices. This, Ben later told me, was how their relationship worked best – working alongside one another, avoiding face-to-face situations, which Jack found confrontational. Indeed, a common refrain amongst Forest School and Care Farm practitioners was that one-to-one learning worked best through non-confrontational, more horizontal contact where young people had more control. This is a particular conception of intimacy that is, unlike later examples in this section, not knowingly “loving”; but this

conception is nevertheless focused upon embodied interactions and inter-personal emotions as much as the pragmatics of learning. Thus, the principle of one-to-one working is one through which the emotional and bodily effects of attending mainstream schools upon *some* young people might be addressed.

The opportunity to work one-to-one is far less common in alternative schools, where children learn in classes, with a teacher. Therefore, different alternative schools work through the question of the human-scale – and specifically intimacy – in different ways from those educators who can work one-to-one with children. At several Small Schools, for instance, smallness of scale was constructed several ways. First, Small Schools generally have fewer than 100 pupils, and therefore combine children into classes with children of different ages (distinct from most mainstream schools with their single-“year groups”). Second, Small Schools are sometimes housed in buildings that do not feel like a large institution: one school I visited was located in an extended semi-detached house in a suburb. Third, whatever their curriculum, the teachers viewed the instilling of intimacy as a careful *balancing* act. In one school – Wheatfields – the headteacher conceived the nursery space as a “haven”, a “first step from home”. The teachers were a “nurturing, gentle presence with kids”, who *would* cuddle the children if they hurt themselves. However, they did not promote such physical contact wholesale: “sometimes you can be overly protective. We are not their parents. They don’t need cuddling all the time [...] it’s the next step up, daring to be in a bigger group”.

Teachers at several other alternative schools spoke in broadly similar ways about intimacy as a process of *liberation* for children, not a cossetting one. Thus, intimacy is conceived as something not only inward-looking but also outward-looking.

“[Health and Safety] guidelines have almost gone against what we had a feeling for. The children used to answer the door. We had to let that go. The climate of security, safeguarding. [We promote] an affectionate relationship, feeling that

you're [teacher] is their equal, your brother or sister. Bending your knees to be on their level, side by side. [...] Some hugging, not too uptight about physical contact. In this way *love* is a precondition for learning [from which] stem many things: having children express themselves, opening out bullying when it's talked about through the group, understanding your place in the world" (Helen, Headteacher, Hawthorn Small School)

Aside from its insight into how intimacy is performed at Hawthorn – through welcome, kneeling, hugging – Helen's words are instructive because of her discussion of *love*. Child-adult relationships at many alternative education spaces were articulated not only in terms of (carefully negotiated) intimacies, but in terms of love. In fact, the deployment of the term was, as I interpreted it, specifically used on one hand to assuage (to me) any sense that adults' intimacies with children were sexualized and, on the other, for the manifold work that love could do.

The term love was used in a triple sense across a range of alternative education spaces: to articulate more definitively what is *different* (perhaps more "human") about child-adult (and child-child) relationships at alternative education spaces; to identify love as an inter-personal emotion that was multi-faceted, but extended beyond romantic or familial love; and to demonstrate *how* inter-personal intimacies were not merely inward-looking but outward-looking, in the service of broader pedagogic, moral or political goals. Two examples – whose pedagogies are quite different – are a Steiner school and a Democratic School⁵:

"I think love is still extremely important. Clearly not romantic love. [...]

Where you're doing something because you know it's what the children need.

I hope that the connections the teachers have to their own inner lives, their

spirituality [...] I would say that love of what we do, the future of the

individual children – that it might be an atmosphere that might nourish them

for the rest of their life. And that is done with a gesture of love. Towards the world, to humanity” (Michael, Steiner school teacher)

“Some people say it was *like* a large family. [...] Kilquhanity would be very caring and loving for those who needed it. But very accommodating for everybody else. [...] There was] love in community meetings. A kind of intimacy. It takes a certain kind of disposition in yourself, if you’re being bullied, to put that out there in a public meeting. You would find a significant number of kids who found the transition from Kilquhanity to society quite difficult. What that means is that there’s something about mainstream society that doesn’t understand being trusting, open, honest, trusting and sharing feelings” (Christopher, ex-pupil, Kilquhanity democratic school)

Herein, love means different things in these different places, but can still be framed as at-once nonrepresentational and representational: everyday, localized, embodied, habituated ways of acting that are tied into broader discourses – moral, political, spiritual – about “humanity”, as Michael put it. For all of these educators – but most explicitly, for Christopher – an expanded concept of love was important in differentiating their schools from “mainstream society” and its constructions of childhood. Such an expanded conception of love also offered a clear example of how intimacies and smallness of scale extended beyond the literal “small scale” of the classroom, being entrained in potentially global ethics of care and responsibility (Kraftl 2013b).

In various guises – which are by no means coherent across different alternative education spaces – intimacy and love helped constitute alter-childhoods. Intimacy and love were produced through particular styles of child-adult relationships that were knowingly differentiated from those taking place in mainstream schools, and which were often deemed

by alternative educators to be problematic. Rather than posit these alter-childhoods as panaceas for more human(e) childhoods, however, I finish this section by posing two questions stimulated by the examples above.

The first question relates to the status of terms like love and intimacy in childhood research. Certainly, various theorists have formulated accounts of how love might matter beyond couple-dom or the nuclear family (e.g., hooks 2003). Yet – alongside questions around sexual consent and voting (Vanderbeck 2008), childhood scholars have rarely discussed intimacy and love: both in terms of children’s experiences of love, and what it might mean to talk of intimacy or love between children and adults *outside* familial relationships, particularly in institutions like schools. Whilst I have discussed how intimacy and love are conceived and performed by educators at alternative education spaces, I have said little about children’s experiences thereof. Therefore, I suggest greater consideration of what are children’s experiences of intimacy and love – not only in romantic or familial or romantic relationships, but also beyond. Moreover, scholars might question whether and how these experiences might enable adults *and* children to foster diverse forms of biopower from below (compare Hardt and Negri 2009).

The second question centers around the relationship between love and biopolitics, which might extend nascent geographical work on love and intimacy. For example, Morrison et al. (2013) offer an analysis of multiple ways in which love maybe entangled with power relations and politics of identity. Nonetheless, the majority of their article is concerned with particular kinds of inter-personal relationships still somehow romanticized, sexualized or familial (also Valentine 2008). In these instances, love has a determinate object: another person, a thing (Ahmed 2004), or a landscape (Wylie 2009). But, more in line with the examples above, for several scholars, love is a key component in the formulation of dissonant biopolitical formulations. For instance, Hardt and Negri define love as the creation of social

life, in which a social collective finds a “qualitative increase in their ability to act and think”, together “with recognition of an external cause” (Hardt and Negri 2009, 181; after Spinoza 2009, Part 3, Prop. xi). This is an extension beyond what Spinoza viewed as the ambivalences of romantic love towards an awareness of one’s place in the world: “love of the entire order of things” (Spinoza 2009, Part 5, Prop. X; also Unger 2007, 229). Not only is a Spinozan conception of love resonant with that of alternative educators (particularly Helen’s description of Hawthorn), but love is also viewed as a kind of affective “push in the world” (Thrift 2004, 64). As Braidotti (2011, 119) has it, “love of the world” is at once an “act of faith in our capacity to make a difference” and “a political act of defiance of social norms”. Love understood thus is affirmative and *potentially* progressive (and transgressive) because it requires bravery: collective, experimental feeling and action that, crucially, are driven by a desire to care for others (especially the young and the old) beyond those in one’s own family (Unger 2007), whether that desire is manifested through a cuddle or, at a push, bike maintenance. Alter-childhoods, as articulated at alternative education spaces, *could* be conceived in part as such brave leaps of faith, driven by forms of love that are understood and practiced in diverse ways. These are diverse “*caring economies*” (Unger 2007, 204, emphasis added; also after Gibson-Graham 2006) in which educators are carefully trying to negotiate the many contradictions surrounding the problem of intimacy between teachers and adults in mainstream education. Yet, two thorny questions remain. One: how to judge the relative moral, political, or pedagogic worth of love in alter-childhoods – especially where some readers might find affinity with them and others might be utterly repulsed? Two: how do these expanded forms of love relate to mainstream ways of constructing childhoods, where it would be problematic to state without further empirical inquiry that love of the kinds articulated above is simply absent?

What’s the difference? Alter-childhoods ‘beyond’ biopolitics

Thus far, I have examined two key domains in which alter-childhoods are produced by adults at alternative education spaces. Significantly, these are two domains that feature in critiques of mainstream schooling (and mainstream childhoods), and which resonate with contemporary theorizations of biopolitics. In this final section, however, I examine some of the potential limitations of both the concepts of alter-childhoods, and biopolitics. I do so via a summary of the ways in which UK alternative education spaces echo and, frequently, actively connect with, a range of currents already underway in the mainstream. Notably, some of these currents resonate with but extend beyond explicitly biopolitical concerns. I focus upon three key currents, highlighting important questions for potential scholarship around alter-childhoods.

The first current is a central concern for many alternative educators: the charge that alternative education is a privatized endeavor. Certainly, one of the (many) criticisms of homeschooling is that it represents a form of privatization for middle-class families with the capital to educate their children at home (e.g., Seo 2009, on South Korea). Moreover, most alternative schools in the UK charge some level of fees. Thus, it could be argued that those parents (and teachers) who are seeking to construct alter-childhoods are following the logic of the “child as accumulation strategy” (Katz 2008; also Mitchell 2003). Yet, given the evidence in this article alone, to reduce all alternative education spaces to this single narrative would be problematic – not least because many forms of alternative education, and some of the sites examined in this article, pre-date the (re)emergence of neoliberalism in the 1980s. Whilst not seeking to defend alternative educators, it is important to recognize far greater complexity, especially in the goals of alternative educators. Here, Gibson-Graham’s work on diverse economic practices is useful. The neoliberal mainstream is not a monolithic entity, capable of subsuming all alternatives (also Unger 2009). Rather, as Gibson-Graham (2006) chart, some diverse economic spaces include economic formations that look very much like

those of mainstream global capitalisms, yet which are twisted to alternative ends or folded into other economic practices (including barter and voluntary labor). Significantly, while many alternative schools charge fees, several support parents who cannot afford fees: at one Steiner School I visited, parents could work (as caretakers or cleaners) in exchange for their child's education. Other alternative education spaces (especially Care Farms and Forest Schools) operate through volunteer labor as charities, with a direct mission to support at-risk youth; some are funded indirectly by the UK Government through referrals of vulnerable children from childhood professionals; others operate as locally-accountable social enterprise businesses. Meanwhile, although homeschooling remains a largely middle-class preserve, I interviewed single, unemployed mothers, and families on lower incomes, who benefitted from rich local parenting cultures (especially in London) where groups of families exchanged childcare and teaching duties. Thus alter-childhoods may remain to some extent a form of neoliberal privatization, whilst the imperative to return at-risk young people to school or paid work at Care Farms may reinforce the idea of childhood as a social investment strategy (Mizen 2003). Yet, redolent of Gibson-Graham's (2006) matrix of diverse economic practices, diverse *educational* practices are founded upon diverse economic models, producing alter-childhoods through combinations of "alternative" and "mainstream" modes of organization.

The second current concerns interaction with mainstream educational spaces. Here, the apparent uniformity of the mainstream, and therefore the basis for some alter-childhoods, is held up to scrutiny. Several brief examples provide a flavor of these interactions. In terms of Steiner Schooling, in 2005, the UK Government sponsored a review that examined the scope for including aspects of the Steiner Curriculum in UK mainstream schools (Woods et al. 2005). Aspects of Montessori Schooling form part of the Early Years Curriculum in the UK, although the implementation thereof varies between schools. Many Care Farmers offer free

advice to the increasing number of mainstream schools choosing to grow food or raise animals. More ambitiously, some alternative educators sought influence within broader communities of practice and policy around contemporary childhoods. For instance, Joanne, the Forest School practitioner discussed earlier, explained:

“Like many Forest Schoolers, I’m keen to be part of a whole community of enquiry about how do we support children who, for whatever reason, have got real tough lives. Although one afternoon can put a child on a high, make them feel safe, comfortable, loved [if] you build up all of that, then it can transform behavior. And I want to be part of a community of people who are working towards that [cites other organizations, such as the National Health Service and National Trust⁶, whom she is working with]. Until we – nationally, internationally – can make a difference, we will always be seen as fluffy. Which we are, but we’re much more than that” (Joanne, Forest School practitioner)

Joanne identified as crucial the need to identify those mainstream experts whose approaches resonated with her own, and who might appreciate her “fluffiness”. Thus, these brief examples demonstrate as much resonance as dissonance between alternative and mainstream, and diversity within the mainstream. Yet, arguably, this is what renders these visions of education and childhood *alter-*, not *anti*-mainstream: working with parts of the established mainstream, yet with a (fluffy) twist that makes greater room for notions like mess, intimacy and love.

The third current concerns the role of alternative education spaces in an age of post-2008 austerity. In the UK, the Government initiated swathing cuts to publicly-funded services, including play- and youth-work (although not compulsory education). Simultaneously, such measures have been accompanied by rhetoric around augmented “localisms”: bolstering the

idea that self-reliant local communities and individuals volunteer or compete for resources to provide services for their locale. This has perhaps ironically presented an opportunity for alternative educators. For instance, the controversial Free Schools policy, introduced by the Government, enables local communities, businesses, educators and other interest groups to apply for Government funding to start a new school if they can establish sufficient demand. Whilst funded by the Government, these schools do not have to follow the National Curriculum, and a range of schools, basing their teaching on wide-ranging pedagogic and spiritual beliefs, has since opened (including at least two Steiner Schools ⁷). Such a move may not be surprising to readers from some non-UK contexts, however: in Germany, some Steiner Schools are funded by the German Federal and State Governments; in New Zealand, alternative schools could from 2011 receive Ministry of Education funding (<http://alternativeeducation.tki.org.nz>).

However, several Care Farmers and Forest Schoolers outlined how, as a result of austerity/localism, they felt increasingly pressured to take on service provision that had been the preserve of the State. Thus, Maura positioned her Care Farm – which provides an adventure playground, social space, clubs and farming activities for children aged 2-18 on a socio-economically deprived outer-city housing estate – as crucial to the *survival* of the community:

“It is about the community for us. I’m going to have to do the work that the Children’s Centres did [...]. It’s a burden that’s going to fall disproportionately on this kind of place. Now the money’s been pulled, it’s reinventing everyone’s expectations. The parents have been brilliant – we’ve been asking them to provide flour, for biscuits, so that we can provide a healthy snack for the kids when they get out of school. I think people will increasingly rely on this kind of place [...] they will become vital for

community life around here, otherwise the community will die, I think”

(Maura, Care Farm practitioner)

These processes spawn two implications for scholarly research. First, if alternative education spaces – and alter-childhoods – are becoming mainstreamed in countries like the UK and New Zealand, then this reinforces a need for dedicated examination of alter-childhoods (especially beyond the contexts discussed in this article). If, as it appears, alternative education spaces are becoming increasingly recognized, and increasingly mainstreamed, what might be the implications – not least for conceptualizing *alter*-childhoods? Moreover, if neoliberal educational reforms have involved privatization towards reduced social investment costs (Mitchell 2003), then it is important to acknowledge how that privatization is diversifying. If forms of voluntarism – tied to short-term, precarious funding streams and charitable work – are accompanying market-focused forms of privatization, to what extent might alternative education spaces be able to offer sustainable spaces that escape the logic of neoliberalism? And how could their success in doing so be measured? Second, questions of biopolitics return here. For, in Maura’s words, some alternative education spaces are becoming “vital for community life”, with explicit attention paid to the bodies, intimate relations and materialities that constitute that life. If biopolitical engagements are concerned, in part, with the proliferation of vitalities (Unger 2007), then, arguably, questions of funding, policy and regulation are inextricably bound up with those material and bodily concerns, and should be treated thus in academic research on alter-childhoods.

Conclusions

This article has proposed and critically interrogated the concept of “alter-childhoods” as a tool for examining the geographies of childhood. It has used the term to examine explicit attempts to imagine and construct childhoods differently, focusing upon the UK alternative education sector. In exemplifying and extending scholarship on children’s geographies and biopolitics, the bulk of the article focused upon two central concerns for alternative education spaces: human and nonhuman bodies and materialities; intimacy, love and the human scale. In respect of the third theme, however, and in conclusion, my argument is not necessarily that these themes should constitute frames of reference for future research on children, especially in geographic contexts that do not resemble the UK. Nor has the article sought to prove that alter-childhoods simply exist: childhoods experienced in alternative education spaces are not somehow pure or static alternatives. Rather, I mapped out some of the empirical terrain through which alter-childhoods are planned, performed, institutionalized and materialized, in ways that could prove helpful to other researchers. Simultaneously, I sought to leave the concept of alter-childhoods sufficiently open to acknowledge that such childhoods are always complex and in-process. Nonetheless, there is clearly more work to be done on these three themes: for instance, to critically interrogate how children experience intimacy and love, particularly outside romantic or familial relationships. Moreover, I have opened out a new direction for research on the somewhat tentatively-defined “new wave” of childhood studies, offering alter-childhoods as an important navigational aid for researching hybrid childhoods. Thus, in the spirit of questioning with which I began, I finish by outlining some final considerations for future research, which are provoked by my analysis in this article. My first and fundamental aim in doing so is to urge for continued deployment of the term “alter-childhoods” as a questioning device. Doing so could enable children’s geographers and other childhood scholars to read for difference and critically analyze biopolitical alternatives, as much as offer critiques of (neoliberal), hegemonic, mainstream forms of biopower. Given

that distinct (if very different) alternative education spaces exist in countries like the USA, some European countries, New Zealand and Australia, these could be empirical starting points. A second possibility would be to read for difference *within* the educational mainstream, whether neoliberal or not: to look for moments of experimentation and creativity that surely exist as teachers and children negotiate the demands of National or State Curricula. Recent work on “implicit activisms” – “small-scale, personal, and modest activisms” in mainstream schools and family support centers may offer just one route for theorizing such moments (Horton and Kraftl 2009, 14; Zembylas 2013, 84; also Curti and Moreno 2010). By extension, scholars might look outside education: to look for alter-childhoods produced in intentional or autonomous communities, in local housing cooperatives, in local (or international) mothering/parenting networks, through play or youth work, through urban or economic development initiatives, through informal labour, in everyday family lives, in migration practices, or elsewhere still – whether or not these are all articulated as explicitly alternative milieu (Longhurst 2013), and whatever the nature and strength of the political, economic or cultural “mainstream” in any given geographic context. A third possibility would be critical examination of already-existing and ever-developing collaborations between alternative and mainstream educators.

A final possibility would be, as implied earlier, to turn the lens back to children and young people. In differentiating my analysis from existing studies of children’s (everyday) political geographies, I have deliberately concentrated upon institutionalized efforts to construct childhoods. I have, therefore, foregrounded the adults who inevitably will be foremost in those programmes. There is, however, also a need for critically-informed, cross-disciplinary research into the effects of alternative education spaces upon children’s experiences of learning and, indeed, of efforts to construct childhood differently upon childhood experiences in the round. Similarly, critical work is needed to examine how children themselves produce

alter-childhoods, with or without adults, and to interrogate whether such scholarship might extend extant work on youth activism, for instance (Jeffrey 2012). Perhaps of greatest importance would be a move not to simply consider children's voices in critiquing adult constructions of childhood, although that should remain an important task. In addition, affirmative critique is required that – as has been my intention – lays out a series of related alter-childhoods on their own terms. The task would then be to take on the recent call for “relational geographies of age” (Hopkins and Pain 2007, 287) to examine how adults *and* children constitute, and are configured, positioned, empowered (or not) and enlivened (or not) in the production of alter-childhoods. This task is important *if* there is agreement that children's geographers and other childhood scholars need not only critique, but constitute part of efforts to exceed, some pervasive contemporary constructions of childhood.

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Notes

¹Given that my observation is simply that geographers working on alternative milieu have rarely engaged with alter-childhoods (compared with much work on food, economies, housing, etcetera), I do not review work on the third field listed here. Rather, I direct readers to Longhurst (2013) for an excellent overview.

²For recent overviews of children's geographies scholarship, see Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2010); Kraftl et al. (2012).

³The UK National Curriculum only applies to England and Wales. Scotland has its own Curriculum for Excellence.

⁴Given that the research took place over a period of ten years, it was subject to ethical scrutiny via a series of institutional ethical review panels, the details of which there is not space to include here. All of the research – especially that with children – followed well-developed protocols recommended in the UK (for instance by the ESRC’s *Framework for Research Ethics*: <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/research-ethics.aspx>), covering issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, disclosure and withdrawal. Except where stated, names of individuals and places are pseudonyms.

⁵Kilquhanity Democratic School is located in southwestern Scotland. It is modeled on the much-better known free school at Summerhill, where education – like all aspects of daily life – is negotiated by adults and children on a more-or-less equal footing.

⁶The National Health Service provides free healthcare (at the point of entry) to UK residents. The National Trust is one of the UK’s largest conservation charities, and recently developed a campaign for “Natural Childhoods”: <http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/what-we-do/big-issues/nature-and-outdoors/natural-childhood/>

⁷To gain a sense of the diversity of Free Schools in the UK, readers may be interested in consulting a list of those schools open by early 2014: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/free-schools-successful-applications-and-open-schools-2014>.

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